

2 games programmers meet unemployment head-on

Out of Atari's game

After the layoffs, two game designers ponder new moves

By Evelyn Richards
Technology Editor

Sometime late last week, Atari Inc. president James Morgan should have received a certain envelope in his inter-office mail. Inside was the June 1982 copy of Popular Computing magazine.

Staring out at Morgan from the magazine cover was the face of Chris Crawford, sporting a grin as wide as Silicon Valley. Crawford, the magazine said, was Atari's secret weapon in computer game design.

Scrawled alongside the story was this note to Morgan: "Do you really want to lay off this guy?"

The package came from Crawford himself. "It's easy to be courageous when you have absolutely nothing to lose," says Crawford, who, at age 33, is a veteran computer game designer.

A man who revels in publicity and admits to having a "gigantic" ego, Crawford was perhaps the best-known among the 300 Atari employees laid off this month.

Another layoff victim — with less of a name, but far more to lose — is Crawford's buddy, Larry Summers.

The two had worked together for years in Atari's research department. They were known for their independence and, in the end, their treasured independence proved to be their downfall.

The two programmers refused to write the flash-bang graphics that make computer games hits. Instead, the buddies spent nearly two years writing a complex thinking-man's game, Excalibur, about King Arthur's Court. When finished, their masterpiece was rejected by Atari's mainline marketing department, and Excalibur is getting a lukewarm reception after its recent introduction by Atari's independent marketing arm.

As Crawford describes it, he and Summers were "creating computer games as an art form." Clearly, their taste in art is different from Atari's — and from the average consumer's.

Nevertheless, the two feel like spurned

lovers. They were loyal to Atari.

With the gusto of a revivalist preacher, Crawford traveled around the country in 1981, touting the Atari 800 computer to programmers. And a few days ago, he still spoke of the 800 with a parent's pride, forming an A-OK sign with his thumb and forefinger as he praised the computer's special "touches."

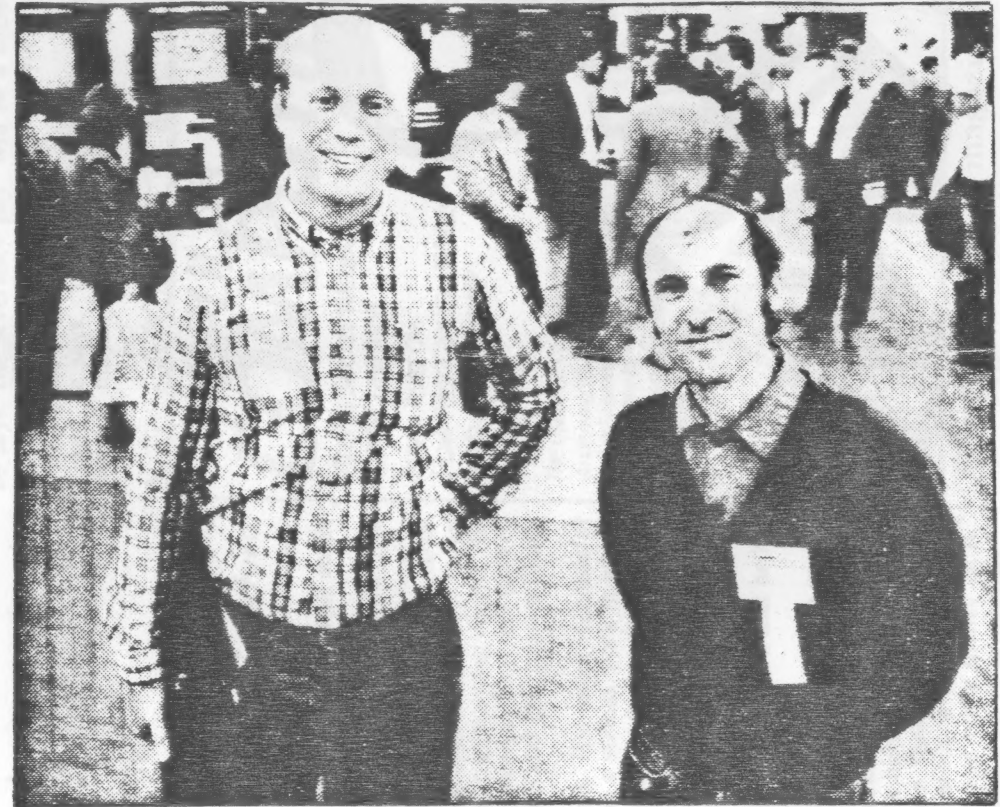
Crawford and Summers expected to be spared in the company's layoffs.

But fringe projects — those that don't produce revenues — are perhaps the easiest to cut. Now Crawford and Summers are forced to decide which way to go at a crossroads they hadn't expected to face.

The pair spent last week trying to decide how to turn rejection into opportunity.

For Crawford, the task is almost fun. For Summers, a 31-year-old father of three who lives on a tight budget, the chore is wrenching.

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Karen T. Borchers — Mercury News

Larry Summers and Chris Crawford attend computer show

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A cordless telephone wedged into the pocket of his jeans, Crawford says he'll take time to "think everything over."

"The first thing we discussed when I was laid off was our priorities," he says. Crawford and his wife, Kathy, "decided to hold onto this place," their home in San Jose's eastern foothills.

"It does constrain my options, but, fortunately, my salary is only 40 percent of my income." The rest comes from royalties and his wife's job.

Still, the options are many for Atari's former manager of games research.

Barely an hour after being summoned by his supervisor March 16, Crawford was lunching with an old friend, tossing around job possibilities at the friend's company.

"It was extremely important to be instantly backed up," he says. "There's this feeling of desperation that gnaws at you."

The layoffs "didn't hit me at the emotional level until Saturday night. Larry came over for dinner, and as he drove off I started thinking about all the good people who were laid off. I realized I'm never going to work with these people again. I cried for about an hour."

Crawford's spirits bounced back quickly. "Just in the last few days, my wit has sharpened," he says, flashing one of his famous bright smiles.

When he went to the office Monday to retrieve his belongings, Crawford grabbed his snapshot, which already had been stripped from the "who's who" bulletin board in the research department. It was a shot of him in a wizard's costume — a takeoff on Merlin in Excalibur. (Merlin in the computer game actually was made from a digitized photo of Crawford.)

On the picture he left behind at Atari, Crawford scribbled: "Now you see him. Now you don't."

Monday and Tuesday brought a flood of opportunities.

Working on two books, consulting for game companies, writing magazine articles and writing games for a well-known book publisher — all these options dance in Crawford's head. While he talked Wednesday, a telephone call brought condolences — and a hint of a job offer — from a friend in another Atari department.

Later in the week, he and Summers met at the West Coast Computer Faire in San Francisco. There, at the Grand Central Station of the computer industry, they

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— Chris Crawford

greeted colleagues with newly printed business cards and resumes.

But for the time being, Crawford seems content to stay close to his home computer and his floor-to-ceiling book shelves. Trained in physics and an amateur astronomer, Crawford boasts that he's written seven games without ever taking a programming course. His book shelves reveal another passion: They are packed with tomes on Voltaire, Plato and European military battles.

War fascinates Crawford. His most successful game, *Eastern Front 1941*, is a serious work in which he's "trying to say something about war as a social phenomenon."

The video game industry is "dominated by hot-shot kids. I don't have respect for them."

And Crawford refuses to join them.

But not everyone is as sure as Crawford that he has — or even deserves — star status.

"If you look at the hits, you'll see whiz-bang graphics, which he plays down," says Craig Nelson, an early Atari employee who now works at Epyx, a Sunnyvale game publisher. Nelson calls himself a "hack," not a game designer, and believes that Crawford should come back to earth. "He needs a good grounding where he has to do a game and make money on it," Nelson says. "His ego has blown out of proportion."

But if Crawford has detractors, he also has admir-

admiration is mutual.

"Larry is a real professional," Crawford says. "He writes beautiful stuff. You can beat on it and it won't screw up." That's computer code he's speaking of.

Summers may write elegant code, but he can't afford to wait for someone to appreciate all its subtleties.

Summers, 31, needs to find a job.

He has three daughters to feed — a four-year-old and twins who are two years old — and monthly mortgage payments on a simple, \$88,000 house he bought a year ago in Livermore. Portraits of the kids top makeshift book shelves in the living room.

A Mormon, Summers tithes 10 percent of his monthly income to the church. And because of his wife's bout with cancer five years ago, Summers needs an employer with a Kaiser-like health plan so she can visit specialists regularly.

A serious man who enjoys chess and Scientific American's math puzzles, Summers learned of his firing last Friday when he was house-bound after having a wisdom tooth pulled.

The telephone call forced him into a "premature" decision. "I'm on the line," he says. "I don't even know if I am going to stay in the game industry."

For the last two of his 3½ years at Atari, Summers programmed for just one project — *Excalibur*. He's admits that "it's still a question whether it will make up the production cost."

Frankly, Summers doesn't expect to find such luxury again.

At some game companies, programmers are tempted by potential royalties if their games are a hit. But their salaries generally are less than the \$38,000 Summers earned at Atari, and royalties are too iffy for his tight ship.

"I don't need any motivation," he says. "If it has my name on it, it will be the best thing I can do."

Through the grapevine, Summers quickly tested a few options in the game industry last week. Almost immediately, he contacted a headhunter.

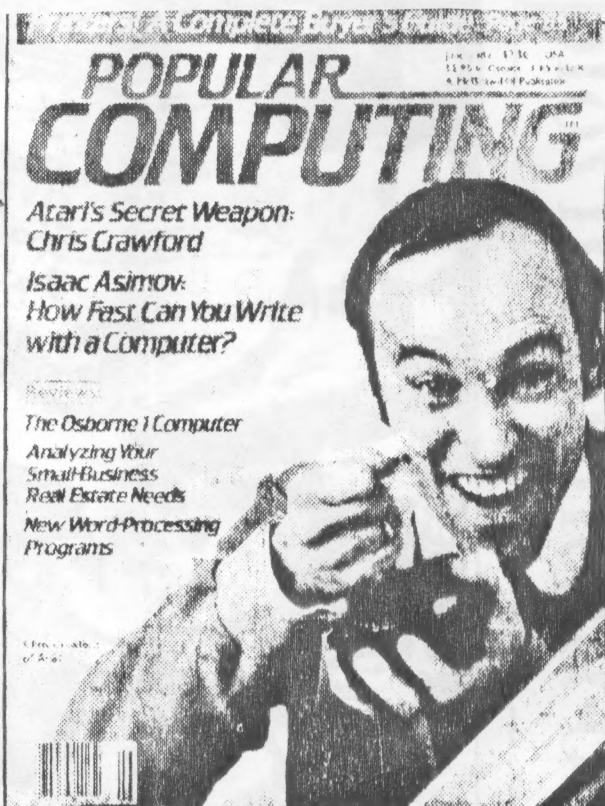
But at the same time, he dropped off his resume at a defense contractor and at the Lawrence Livermore labs.

He's not sure he can afford to wait for an employer who's also a connoisseur of "artistic" computer games.

With severance and vacation pay, Summers figures that Atari owes him about seven to nine weeks of his salary.

"I want to be employed within three to five weeks," he says. The severance pay "will be a buffer" for the extra gas used in job-hunting and for the cost of printing resumes.

And, he says, "to make the inconvenience a little sweeter, maybe I can get something for the family."



Chris Crawford on magazine cover

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— Chris Crawford
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